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Editor's Notebook: What's New(s)?

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WHAT'S NEW(S)?

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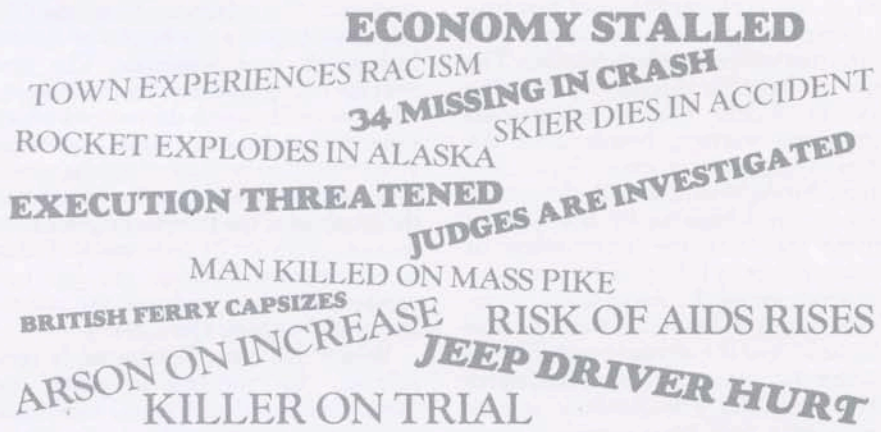

It happened after a few years of nightly reports of American casualties in Viet Nam. There was film of wounded soliders being hurried into helicopters and the relentless counting of body bags. As our capacity to absorb tragedy overflowed, many frustrated Americans wanted some relief from the bad news. Some asked, "Why don't THEY show more good news?", meaning the television and newspaper people.

When it became clear during Jimmy Carter's presidency that the American hostages held by that odd man in Iran would not be brought home quickly despite our wealth, power and technology, the complaint was common again. During the Watergate scandal, the OPEC oil embargo, the rise in rates of crime, drug abuse, cases of AIDS and, most recently, the messy deal in which we shipped arms to Iran to get hostages freed, the cry has gone out for relief from the bad news.

Part of the frustration suffered by those who would like journalists to ease up on the bad tidings is that many people, including our president, think the news industry is an invention of those who work within it. The judicial, legislative and executive branches of government are specifically established in our constitution, but with the exception of the first amendment, there is no enabling legislation for the establishment of news organizations. Who told these people who bring us such unrelenting bad news that this is how journalism should operate? Where is it written that bad news can't be balanced, say half-and-half, with more uplifting stuff.

This is just the sort of plea that has been made by a string of presidential defenders. Richard Nixon had his Spiro Agnew, who referred to newspaper reporters as "the jackal press." Ronald Reagan's man has been Patrick Buchanan, who blamed the press corps for "tearing down America" and "tying the president's hands" in the conduct of his foreign policy. At times they seem to wish that, "in the interest of the country", no bad news be reported at all.

Of course, it is possible to argue that this should not happen because the free press in America provides a vital check on excess, inefficiency and plain corruption in society. But what is more fundamental is that in any society, and especially in one that supports a free press, it simply CANNOT happen. This is due to a simple fact about the way people and societies (not just our own) operate.

In everyday life we depend upon sets of rules for behavior called norms. For example, we know how to talk on the telephone or how to act in a doctor's office because we learn how from our parents, teachers and one another. Norms differ between cultures, and even between subgroups within one culture, but what all norms have in common is that they are matters of agreement among groups of people. These rules for behavior make life predictable to the extent that they are shared, and we need that predictablility to feel secure.

We come to depend upon the predictability of social life and become extremely anxious when it is threatened. Even simple rudeness, or the failure to keep an appointment is enough to upset most people. But there are more deeply-held, more vital norms than these. For example, we have laws against theft, assault, murder, and incest. Violations of such rules result in proportionately greater discomfort than the violation of rules for everyday interaction, especially when they are violated by people in whom we have placed great trust, such as a president or police officer, or when violations occur within the everyday operation of our most critical institutions, such as the courts or the stock market.

Thus, crime of any sort is news because we become concerned that our general ability to predict that others will not cheat or harm us will be diminished. And a crime committed by a public figure, such as the President of the United States, takes on magnified importance since such a person serves as a symbol of the extent to which our norms can be trusted to work. If a President of the United States acts immorally or breaks the law, what reason is there to believe that anyone won't do the same?

Now it should be possible to see that "the news" (meaning the "bad news") is inevitable, and why what we might call "good news" is not news at all. We constantly need to keep tabs on the stablility of our social, political, and economic environment, and we cannot accomplish this by being assured that all is well. By experience we know that the world at every level quivers and shifts, sometimes dramatically. The news is just what it sounds like, new information about the changes (or potential changes) in our world; changes that we might like to prevent but which, if they do come to pass, should certainly require different ways of behaving for which we would rather be prepared. "Good news" is a contradiction in terms because what is new is always perceived as a threat to our accustomed ways of behaving. For those people who would rather be reassured that "everything was just fine today", I suggest they stick to reading what makes them happy and allow the rest of us to continue monitoring the turbulence in the social waters. □